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IDEALISM IN YOGĀCĀRA BUDDHISM

By Sean Butler

Abstract. In the last fifty years or so, since Yogācāra texts have been available to western academics, there has been a debate as to how Yogācāra Buddhism should be interpreted. This article seeks to establish that Yogācāra Buddhism is most properly interpreted as an idealist school of Buddhist thought. Specifically, it challenges the arguments that have been put forth in recent years that suggest a phenomenological interpretation of Yogācāra Buddhism. The primary target of my argumentation is Dan Lusthaus but arguments of other scholars are also taken into account. In the process of defending my thesis I will explain the fundamentals of Yogācāra Buddhism, provide the reasons why Yogācāra Buddhism should be interpreted as an idealist school, provide reasons why some have interpreted Yogācāra Buddhism as phenomenology, refute non-idealist interpretations of Yogācāra Buddhism, and investigate the relation between Yogācāra Buddhism and other forms of idealism. In order to achieve each of these goals I will utilize the original texts of Yogācāra Buddhism, known as the *Trimsika*, authored by Vasubandhu and the *Cheng Wei-Shih Lun*, authored by Hsüan-Tsang. I will also reference and expound upon the philosophies of George Berkeley, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Hegel along with recent scholars who have partaken in this debate.

“All this is consciousness-only, because of the appearance of non-existent objects, just as someone with an optical disorder may see non-existent nets of hair.”¹

1. Introduction

Yogācāra Buddhism is often interpreted as an idealist school, a school of Buddhist thought that holds reality to be immaterial, or only mental² This interpretation is sometimes disputed. Here I will demonstrate that Yogācāra philosophy is most properly interpreted as idealism. I will then address some non-idealist interpretations of Yogācāra, primarily, but not limited to, Dan Lusthaus’ claim that Yogācāra is phenomenology, and demonstrate their failure. Lastly I will briefly explore the similarities and differences between Yogācāra and various forms of idealist philosophies.

2. Yogācāra Buddhism

Yogācāra Buddhism is an Indian Buddhist school “founded in the late fourth century CE by Asanga and his brother Vasubandhu, as the second of the two major Mahayana philosophical traditions.”³ “Yogācāra” is a composite term of “yoga,” or

¹ Saam Trivedi, “Idealism and Yogacara Buddhism,” *Asian Philosophy* 15 (3): 235. Trivedi is using Stefan Anacker’s translation of Vasubandhu’s *Vimsatika*, Verse 1.

² Ibid., 231.

“discipline,” and “*cara*,” or “practice.” Yogācāra Buddhism, then, is essentially Buddhist practice of discipline.⁴ Like all Buddhist schools Yogācāra aims at the cessation of *dukkha*, loosely translated as suffering, which is realized at the attainment of enlightenment. Because attachment is the cause of *dukkha*, and attachment is an activity of the mind, Yogācārāns involve themselves in an exploration of the mind. The primary conclusions to which the Yogācārāns arrive to explain the role of the mind are (1) everything is mind only; (2) that there is an *ālayavijñāna*, or store-house consciousness, which allows for continuity of a “self” despite universal momentariness; (3) *vasanas*, or subliminal inclinations, act as karmic seeds that are stored in the *ālayavijñāna*; (4) the *manas*, or ego consciousness, influenced by the *vasanas*, color or “perfume” our perception of the world; (5) the perceived world is *viññāna-parināma*, or a manifestation of the transforming of the consciousness; and (6) there are three forms of being, or *svabhavas*, the imagined, the dependent and the absolute.⁵ These primary tenets of Yogācāra philosophy guide nearly all debate as to how Yogācāra is most properly interpreted, ie. whether or not Yogācāra Buddhism is idealism. All Yogācārāns will generally agree with these six conclusions. There does exist disagreement internal to the Yogācāra school; for example, practitioners disagree as to how one comes to escape from *saṃsāra*, or the cycle of re-birth and re-death, how one gets rid of the *vasanas* in order to cease the production of karmic fruit, and whether or not the *ālayavijñāna* is overturned upon enlightenment. But the disagreements that are internal to the Yogācāra school are not relevant to the task of this paper.

3. Why Yogācāra Is Idealism⁶

It is not uncommon to interpret Yogācāra as idealism. Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti, in their essay “Philosophy of Mind in the Yogācāra Buddhist Idealistic School,” take the Yogācāran understanding of *svabhavas* to profess idealism:

two of these natures (the dependent and the imagined) constitute the empirical reality, and the third one, the Absolute. To study these three natures is to study the empirical reality and the Absolute; to define the essence of these three natures is to define the essence of the empirical reality and of the Absolute; and to establish the relation which links both of them, and to show the mechanism by means of which the imagined nature comes forth from the dependent nature, is to show the process of how the empirical world is created from the mind...⁷

Their analysis of the three forms of being seems to yield not only a mind-dependant world but also a mind-created world. This conclusion is supported by Vasubandhu in

³ John M. Koller, *Asian Philosophies* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 96.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For verification of these claims, see: Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), throughout.

⁶ In this section I demonstrate the reasons why Yogācāra has been interpreted as Idealism and why such interpretations are reasonable. Such interpretations, however, have been challenged in recent years. It is the overall aim of this paper, though not this particular section, to establish that new developments in interpreting Yogācāra fail to overcome idealistic interpretations.

⁷ Fernando Tola & Carmen Dragonetti, “Philosophy of Mind in the Yogacara Buddhist Idealistic School,” *History of Psychiatry*, 16 (4): 454.

verse 17 of his *Trimsika*:

The transformation of consciousness is imagination. What is imagined B y it does not exist. Therefore everything is representation-only.⁸

This is also illustrated in verse 18:

For consciousness is the seed of everything. Transformation in such and such ways

Proceeds through mutual influence, so that such and such imagination is born.⁹

Further, verse 17 is reminiscent of Kant's transcendental idealism, which claims that empirical perceptions are only appearances.¹⁰ Verse 18 more closely resembles Berkeley's idealistic claim that the world is mind dependant.¹¹ In either case it is hard to imagine that these claims are not idealistic. Verse 17 explicitly categorizes all things as representations that are dependant on the imagination (a function of the mind) rather than the sensing of a real world. Verse 18 clearly establishes consciousness, or the mind, as the foundation for all things (including physical objects). The clear reaction to Vasubandhu's writings is, I think, the one that Paul Griffiths summarizes well when he states,

The cosmos, then, is straightforwardly said to be nothing more than mental events, and, as Vasubandhu points out, mental representations do not necessarily (perhaps necessarily do not, though this interpretation is questionable) possess, or have as their intentional objects, physical objects external to the mind.¹²

In Yogācāra Buddhism, priority is definitely given to the mind's involvement in the world and, under some understandings of idealism, priority given to the mind is sufficient. The *Dictionary of Philosophy* defines idealism as:

[...] any system or doctrine whose fundamental interpretative principle is ideal. Broadly, any theoretical or practical view emphasizing mind (soul, spirit, life) or what is characteristically of pre-eminent value or significance to it. Negatively, the alternative to Materialism.¹³

Other understandings of idealism differ. For example, S. Trivedi distinguishes between three types of idealism (i) metaphysical idealism (the idealism put forward by George Berkeley), (ii) epistemic idealism (the idealism put forward by Emmanuel Kant), and (iii) absolute idealism (the idealism put forward by Georg Hegel).¹⁴ Trivedi understands idealism in its Western sense by the philosophers who are called idealists, namely Berkeley, Kant, and Hegel.¹⁵ Because Trivedi's understanding of

⁸ Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 291. Dan Lusthaus uses Richard Robinson's translation.

⁹ Ibid., 292.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155.

¹¹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "George Berkeley," WMU Library, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/berkeley/>

¹² Paul Griffiths, "The Attainment of Cessation in the Yogacara Tradition," in *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem*, (La Salle: Open Court, 1986), 80.

¹³ Dagobert D. Runes, *The Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Citadel Press, 2001), 142.

¹⁴ A discussion on the similarities and differences between the philosophies of Berkeley, Kant, and Hegel, would be far too technical and lengthy a process to undertake here. Readers who are interested in

idealism is rooted in the systems of these Western philosophers, he concludes that Vasubandhu's conclusions are not idealist conclusions. However, there is no good reason to consider idealism only in its Western context. Advaita philosophy, for example, is idealism; and while this sort of idealism resembles more closely absolute idealism, it is not identical to Hegel's philosophy and would therefore, according to Trivedi's criteria, not be idealism.

A criterion that idealism be rooted only in the philosophies of particular thinkers is an absurd criterion, for if it is the case that idealism is defined by similarity to idealist thinkers in history, then thinkers such as Kant, who is almost universally considered to be an idealist but whose philosophy was new and unique, would be excluded from the category simply because idealism existed before Kant did, thus excluding Kant's new idealism. In other words the category of idealism, according to Trivedi, is temporally and culturally restricted, allowing for no new idealists in the future or outside of the Western tradition. It is fair to question whether or not Yogācāra should be associated with the philosophies of idealists in the West, but not to question whether or not Yogācāra is idealism, for it resembles too closely those philosophies that are unquestionably idealist and fits the criterion of giving priority to the mind.

4. Arguments For A Non-Idealist Interpretation Of Yogācāra

We have already partly explored one objection to Yogācāra as idealism. It is appropriate now to reinterpret Trivedi's objection in its full context, as well as other objections to Yogācāra as idealism, such as that raised by Lusthaus.

I have already established that Trivedi's criterion for idealism is absurd, but his criterion is not at the heart of his argument. Trivedi's primary objection is that Vasubandhu's position has been taken out of context and made to seem more like idealism than it actually is.¹⁵ Trivedi suggests that Vasubandhu's Yogācāra has been influenced by Tibetans. When Buddhists were forced out of India by Islamic invaders, Buddhism essentially left India and lost its historical and cultural context. Trivedi argues that this would be like studying Kant as though he were a Frenchman. We could not, he claims, do justice to Kant's philosophy from this perspective. Philosophies, rather, must be understood contextually.¹⁷

To reinforce his objection, Trivedi targets Garfield's conclusions that Yogācāra is metaphysical idealism, instead suggesting that Yogācāra is phenomenology. His position is based on the fact that Vasubandhu did not make any ontological claims. Trivedi's argument resembles one of Dan Lusthaus's arguments against the idealistic interpretation of Yogācāra. Lusthaus quite plainly argues in favor of a phenomenalist interpretation of Yogācāra. Whereas Trivedi's focus is solely on Vasubandhu, Lusthaus's arguments are inclusive of later Yogācārins. He also makes the argument that idealism requires ontological commitments that Vasubandhu and other Yogācārins have demonstrably avoided. Lusthaus takes Hsüan-Tsang's *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* to make the epistemology of Yogācāra explicit: "remote alambana [objects] are 'external hyle [raw sense material].'"¹⁸ Lusthaus interprets this passage as a rejection of the knowable outside of raw sense material; he takes this to be evidence for Trivedi

¹⁵ Saam Trivedi, "Idealism and Yogacara Buddhism," *Asian Philosophy* 15 (3): 231.

¹⁶ Saam Trivedi, "Idealism and Yogacara Buddhism," *Asian Philosophy* 15 (3): 244.

¹⁷ Ibid.

and Lusthaus's claim that the epistemic conclusions put forth by Yogācārāns have been misinterpreted as ontological when they actually avoid ontological commitments.¹⁹ Essentially the argument in favor of phenomenology is that the epistemic claims made by Yogācārāns do not commit them to any ontological claims.

Furthermore, Lusthaus sees another rejection of idealism in the *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* having to do with an externality to consciousness. The *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* affirms the existence of other minds. Lusthaus takes this to be fatal to the idealist interpretation. He states, "once and for all a very common misconception concerning Yogācāra as an idealism can be put to rest. Yogācāra does not posit any single overarching 'mind' or 'consciousness' as the source or solitary existent of or in the world."²⁰ Lusthaus takes metaphysical idealism to be necessarily solipsistic and, if he is correct, then the *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* has indeed delivered the fatal blow to interpretations of Yogācāra as an idealism. The power of Lusthaus's argument is best expressed in his own words:

Nothing whatsoever, especially if it can be appropriated by conversation or cognition, can properly be said to be radically separate from consciousness. This does not entail the absurd consequence that my consciousness and my consciousness alone has thoroughly and utterly constructed the entire Lived-world in which I locate myself as a self. While there are things that operate in ways that are significantly independent of my consciousness, their independence does not imply externality. I perceive other minds as moved by wills and intents other than my own. But I perceive them. Does this non-external "external" mind establish a perceptual pattern that might equally be applied to other things? [...] If so, then all shreds of metaphysical idealism will have been precluded from the Yogācāra position.²¹

The third and final argument Lusthaus offers against Yogācāra Buddhism being interpreted as idealism is that idealism commits itself to the mind, whereas Yogācāra seeks the mind's destruction. Recall that the aim of all Buddhist schools is the cessation of *dukkha*. To accomplish this goal Yogācārāns have explored the consciousness because of its direct involvement in causing *dukkha*. Lusthaus offers two arguments:

Yogācāra (yoga practice) doctrine received that name because it provided a "yoga," a comprehensive, therapeutic framework for engaging in the practices that lead to the goal of the bodhisattva path, namely enlightened cognition. Meditation served as the laboratory in which one could study how the mind operated.²²

And moreover,

Consciousness (*vijnana*) is not the ultimate reality or solution, but rather the root problem. This problem emerges in ordinary mental operations, and it can only be solved by bringing those operations to an end.²³

For *dukkha* to be overcome, the whole system of Yogācāra needs to be halted. Yogācāra explains how the mind operates in *samsara*, but this is precisely what is to

¹⁸ Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 504.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 487.

²¹ Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 491.

²² Ibid., 533.

be avoided. Yogācāra simply cannot be an idealism if its ultimate goal is to overcome itself.

The last objection which I will offer is that of John M. Koller. Koller argues from the same position put forth by Lusthaus. Yogācāra is not idealism, claims Koller, but rather a middle path between idealism and realism.²⁴ Because Yogācārāns acknowledge that “there is a basis for the constructions of object and subject and that this basis can be known directly, they avoid the idealist error of claiming that persons and things exist only as ideas in the mind.”²⁵ This is to say that Yogācārāns understand that their efforts to understand the functioning of the mind are meant only to explain how *dukkha* arises from “selves” that exist outside of their idealistic structure. In other words, there is a foundation in the world from which the Yogācāran system arises that is not contained within consciousness. We can infer from this claim that upon reaching enlightenment, or the cessation of *dukkha* and therefore the cessation of the Yogācāran system, one will have attained an existence that is not described by Yogācāra, one that is not involved in the conditioning of the world by the consciousness.

5. Refuting Non-Idealist Interpretations Of Yogācāra

Here I will argue that, though the above objections to interpreting Yogācāra as idealism may sound convincing, they are flawed. I will address each of the objections outlined above. Additionally, although some of the above arguments are interrelated, I will do my best to address them each individually.

Trivedi has argued that an idealist interpretation of Yogācāra fails to recognize the context in which Yogācāra was first put forth by Vasubandhu. He claimed that Yogācāra has been inappropriately colored by a context of which it is not a part. He claimed that Western and Tibetan interpretations are flawed in the same way that understanding Kant in the context of the French existentialists would be.²⁶ While it is true that context is valuable in understanding historical philosophy, Trivedi seems to give it too much weight. Studying Kant in a French context would surely change the way we view his philosophy, but not to the extent that we would no longer call him a transcendental idealist. Kant would still have a categorical imperative. We would surely be able to recognize his arguments for the world of appearances and the *a priori* cause to believe in a world beyond our appearances. I concede that certain aspects of how Kant is understood might change; for example, we might not recognize him as being the inspiration for Fichte, but those claims that are internal to Kant would remain untouched so long as the translations represented them accurately. Furthermore, Yogācāra has been viewed in its historical and cultural context and is still understood as idealistic. Karl H. Potter, in his book *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*, investigated the various schools of thought in India and their relations to each other. Yogācāra, Potter reports, is an idealist Buddhist school influenced by Advaita and Madhyamika, among others. Trivedi argues that we have misunderstood Yogācāra. It seems obvious that, if he is correct, it is not simply because of the context in which

²³ Ibid., 533.

²⁴ John M. Koller, *Asian Philosophies* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 102.

²⁵ John M. Koller, *Asian Philosophies* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 102.

²⁶ Saam Trivedi, “Idealism and Yogacara Buddhism,” *Asian Philosophy* 15 (3): 244.

we study it.

The second objection Trivedi puts forth is the same as that of Lusthaus; Yogācāra, they argue, is not idealism but phenomenology. First of all, there is nothing inherent in phenomenology that precludes idealism. Usually phenomenology is distinguished from idealism in that it deals only with what is presented to the mind and makes no ontological commitments, however, the lack of ontological commitments does not preclude idealism. Trivedi and Lusthaus are right to acknowledge the phenomenological aspects of Yogācāra, but are incorrect in believing that Yogācāra is only phenomenology. The doctrine of *cittmata*, or “all is mind only,” is read in two ways. First, it can be read as the ontological claim that all existing objects are mind-dependant, the one that Griffiths takes to be blatantly idealistic. It holds that the entire cosmos to be composed of mind “stuff” and nothing else. The second way to interpret *cittmata*, the interpretation that Lusthaus and Trivedi favor, is that consciousness cannot transcend itself, that all events that are brought before the mind involve the mind’s participation. This second interpretation makes no claim outside of what is brought before the mind and is therefore phenomenological. I argue that these two claims are not mutually exclusive. If we are to assume there is something other than mind then the second interpretation precludes the first, however, if there is only mind, then there is nothing beyond phenomenology to make claims about, and phenomenology becomes idealism. For this reason it would be premature to take *cittmata* as either an idealistic or a phenomenological claim in and of itself. Whether or not *cittmata* is a doctrine of idealism or phenomenology hinges on whether or not there is anything other than mind.

The task of discovering whether or not there is anything other than mind is a difficult one because Yogācārāns do not talk about anything outside of the mind. In fact, anything outside of the mind must be considered to be “unreal,” because in order for anything to be outside of the mind there must be unconditioned *dharma*s; however, *dharma*s are by definition conditioned, thus unconditioned *dharma*s are unreal.²⁷ If anything outside of the mind is “unreal” then what is real is mind-only. This conclusion agrees with both the idealist and the phenomenalist interpretation of *cittmata*.

To make the point clear let us look at how a Western idealist approaches the issue. George Berkeley has an argument that commits the phenomenological conclusion to idealism. Berkeley first establishes a mind-only principle and concludes from this principle the impossibility of objects outside of a mind:

That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist without the mind, is what everybody will allow. And it seems no less evident that the various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever objects they compose) cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them. I think an intuitive knowledge may be obtained of this, by anyone that shall attend to what is meant by the term *exist* when applied to sensible things. The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. [...] For as to what is said of the

²⁷ Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 528-9.

absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.²⁸

The power of Berkeley's argument lies in the necessity of one's cognitive involvement in the world; this Lusthaus admits to. When considered linguistically, or what we mean when we say X, the phenomenological interpretation of *cittmata* commits one to the idealist claim. What is meant by ontology is that which is, was, or will be presented to the mind. Thus phenomenal claims *are* ontological claims; this logically follows from the recognition that the mind cannot escape itself. So we see that though Yogācārāns have not explicitly made this argument, the positions to which they adhere commit them to the ontological interpretation of *cittmata*. With the ontological claim established, we see that Trivedi, Lusthaus and any others who interpret Yogācāra as phenomenology may do so, so long as they do not mistakenly take this to mean that Yogācāra is not also idealism.

Having established the failure of the argument for a phenomenology that precludes idealism, I would like to take this opportunity to comment on how it is that Lusthaus in particular came to reject idealism. Lusthaus seeks to reject idealism is because he finds it repugnant; Lusthaus believes that idealism necessitates solipsism. Recall that Lusthaus claims that the recognition of other minds in the *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* "does not entail the absurd consequence that my consciousness and my consciousness alone has thoroughly and utterly constructed the entire Lived-world in which I locate myself as a self."²⁹ It is common for idealism to be misinterpreted as solipsism, especially the metaphysical idealism of Berkeley which we have likened to Yogācāra. Berkeley has often been interpreted as a solipsist because of his tenet "*esse* is *percipi*." Certainly the claim that "to be is to be perceived," from the perspective of the individual, yields a sort of phenomenological solipsism, however, Berkeley's full claim is not expressed in this tenet. The full claim is "*esse* is *percipi aut percipere*," or "to be is to be perceived or to be a perceiver." Because Berkeley is a metaphysical idealist, and not a solipsist, we can conclude that metaphysical idealism does not require solipsism. Lusthaus is simply wrong to think that the existence of other minds entails the rejection of idealism. Furthermore, the absolute idealism of Hegel requires other minds, so even if Berkeley were a solipsist, the existence of other minds would not preclude every type of idealism.

A second misunderstanding of idealism that is common amongst those (Lusthaus included) who find it repugnant is that idealism entails a rejection of the reality of the world. It is easy to see how one would come to this conclusion. When the waking world is equated with the dreaming world, as is done explicitly in Yogācāra and is suggested by other idealisms, one could easily take this to entail that the unreality of the dreaming world is now the unreality of the waking world. This is no more correct than a materialist concluding that the material reality of the waking world entails the material reality of the dreaming world. Idealism does not claim that the world does not exist; idealism claims that materialists misinterpret existence to require material-

²⁸ George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Kenneth Winkler (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), 24.

²⁹ Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 491.

ity. The world still exists for the idealist, just not materially. I take Lusthaus to be a victim to this misunderstanding when he says, “If they [Yogācārāns] are not idealists, what are they? What do they posit as real, if anything?”³⁰ If this misunderstanding is corrected I think that scholars like Lusthaus and Trivedi would not be so eager to reject an idealist interpretation of Yogācāra.

That being said, Koller’s objection is now much easier to address. If the phenomenological interpretation of Yogācāra is really an idealistic interpretation, then what is left to address about Koller’s objection is the idealistic mistake “that persons and things exist only as ideas in the mind.”³¹ Koller maintains that the foundation for cognition precludes the possibility of persons and things existing only as ideas. This objection carries weight against the absolute idealism of Hegel but fails to properly understand the idealism of Kant or Berkeley. Kant’s transcendental idealism does not preclude a foundational existence; in fact it embraces the foundation and calls it *noumena*. Berkeley also recognizes the foundation of thought as being something other than ideas. Berkeley claims that there are not just ideas, but also minds or spirits that perceive the ideas (which are not ideas themselves). It seems that Koller is simply mistaken to think that idealists, or at least idealists other than Hegel, treat perceivers as ideas in the mind.

I have now shown that the compelling arguments offered by Lusthaus, Trivedi, and Koller ultimately fail and the interpretation of Yogācāra as anything but idealism either fails to understand idealism or mistakes phenomenology as necessarily excluding idealism. I will now move to a discussion on the similarities and differences between Yogācāra and various kinds of idealism.

6. What Sort Of Idealism Is Yogācāra?

Having established that Yogācāra is in fact idealism, it is now appropriate to investigate the question: what sort of idealism is Yogācāra? It is not necessary for Yogācāra to fit Western models of idealism, but it will be useful to see in what ways Yogācāra parallels each of these. Of course a sufficiently thorough investigation is too large a task to undertake here, but establishing some similarities and differences will prove useful.

We can eliminate an interpretation of Yogācāra as absolute idealism up front. Absolute idealism, the idealism of Hegel, is unique to a particular method. Hegel uses a dialectical method or logic that is nowhere to be found in the Yogācāra tradition. Furthermore, in the absence of this method, Koller’s objection outlined above suggests that a view of idea-only is not compatible with the Yogācāran requirement for a foundation from which the consciousness can operate. There is, however, one important similarity between Yogācāra and absolute idealism: the concept of the self. Being a Buddhist school requires that Yogācārāns maintain a denial of a distinct self. In Hegel’s philosophy there is a self that is created through the recognition of the other. The process for the creation of the “self” in Hegel’s philosophy closely resembles the interdependence of the “self” in Buddhism. In Buddhism it is not so much a denial of the self but rather a denial of an individually existing and independent self. Hegel’s

³⁰ Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 6.

³¹ John M. Koller, *Asian Philosophies* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 102.

self is similarly not distinct but dependant upon its involvement in the world.

The next two idealisms to which I will compare Yogācāra are the epistemic idealism of Kant and the metaphysical idealism of Berkeley. Yogācāra shares a great deal of similarity with both of these forms of idealism. The *vasanas* or “perfumings” in Yogācāra are reminiscent of Kant’s categories. For Kant there is a structure in each of us, a way in which we must perceive the world. This structure determines how we perceive the world. For example, Kant challenges the reality of absolute space and time and reduces them to a sort of rational set of goggles that each of us wears which forces the world of appearances into a structure of time and space. This is similar to Yogācāra in that, within that philosophy, our karmic seeds or *vasanas* determine how the world is presented to us. Also, according to Kant’s idealism, the perceived world is really just the mind in much the same way that Yogācārāns use a mirror analogy to express the seeming externality of the world which, for them, is really internal. Another analogy that can be drawn is that freedom from *samsara* in Yogācāra, seen through Kant’s eyes, would be an attempt at recognizing the world in itself, what Kant would call the *noumenal* world. Kant prescribes *a priori* reason as the vehicle to the *noumenal* world, whereas Yogācārāns believe that through a thorough investigation into the world of appearances, one can learn how to differentiate or stop one’s attachment to appearances and come to know ultimate reality. In both philosophies the ultimate reality is beyond the mind’s grasp but is nevertheless accepted as real. Yogācāra parts paths with epistemic idealism when it comes to their respective views of the self. Whereas Yogācārāns’ view of the self more closely resembles absolute idealism, epistemic idealism presumes a distinct self. There are other places in which these philosophies fail to meet, but it is sufficient to establish that Yogācāra cannot be epistemic idealism due to the different notions of the self.

Metaphysical idealism and Yogācāra will also part paths in their understanding of the self. For this reason, Yogācāra cannot be equated with metaphysical idealism, though we should also acknowledge where these two philosophies concur. Metaphysical idealism and Yogācāra agree that the “self” experiences the world as mind-only. The objects of consciousness according to both philosophies are mental events. Berkeley maintains that these mental events are ideas, whereas Yogācārāns maintain a less strict and slightly more complex explanation for the objects of perception. Berkeley will also diverge from Yogācāra in the understanding of particulars. The Yogācārāns adhere to the Buddhist doctrine of interdependent arising, which requires a more interconnected explanation with regard to any particular. Berkeley, on the other hand, maintains particulars in the form of *minima sensibilia*, or the minimal object of sense, which act as the building blocks for the whole phenomenal world. Yogācāra has some vital commonalities with metaphysical idealism, but alas, they do not completely coincide.

7. Conclusion

The congruences and departures between Yogācāra and idealism are vast in number. Though I have not been able to explore the issue thoroughly here, what is important to note is that Yogācāra, though similar in many regards with idealisms in the West, must be viewed as its own form of idealism. That it is idealism can no longer be denied, yet it obviously does not fit into our traditional Western models. This

should not, as Trivedi has suggested, exclude Yogācāra from the category of idealism, but instead be an impetus for change in the Western understanding of the term.

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